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The First Specimen Record of Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) for North America

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ABSTRACT.—A Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) was found alive on 11 October 1996 in Newfoundland, Canada. It was identified as a Great Blue Heron (*A. herodias*), and prepared as a study skin for a university teaching collection. We give a description of this first specimen for North America and summarize previous records from the western hemisphere. *Received 31 October 2005. Accepted 1 March 2006.*

The first Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) specimen for North America was discovered by MR while selecting bird specimens from a teaching collection for an ornithology class at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) in September 2002. It had been lying, misidentified, in the MUN collection for years. The bird has been found moribund on 11 October 1996 at Lear's Cove (46° 50' N, 054° 11' W), Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland, about 3 km north of Cape St. Mary's and taken to Salmonier Nature Park where it died.

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This bird was presumed to be a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), was frozen and sent to the Biology Department at MUN to be used in teaching specimen preparation. The skin was prepared by a student, deposited in the collection, and labeled as a Great Blue Heron. It is now deposited in the Royal Ontario Museum as catalog number ROM 104256: male, culmen: 120 mm, flattened wing: 455 mm, tarsus: 152 mm (measurements by MR).

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The heron was gray above and white on the belly. The sides of the neck were uniform gray, and the crown was gray with a small blackish gray crest. The combination of a gray neck and white belly, and size rules out most of the world's herons other than Gray and Great Blue herons.

Plumage.—The specimen lacks any rusty brown on the leg feathers or on the underwing or neck in contrast to a Great Blue Heron. There is a slightly buffy hue on the thighs. The front of the neck is white with bold black spots of high contrast. Thinner, longer, less well-defined black streaks continue from the neck to the belly. The neck on the Gray Heron is plain gray laterally without such markings



FIG. 1. Dorsal and ventral view of Gray Heron, found on 11 October 1996 at Lear's Cove, Newfoundland.

as the distinct pale streaking along the side of the neck of immature Great Blue Herons

Size and Proportions.—The Newfoundland Gray Heron was a male (based on dissection as noted on the specimen label). Herons show

slight sexual dimorphism in size with some overlap (Butler 1992, Cramp and Snow 1998). The bill especially appears proportionately shorter in the Gray Heron (Figs. 1, 2). The culmen length of the Newfoundland specimen



FIG. 2. Gray Heron (above) and Great Blue Heron (below) in the Memorial University of Newfoundland collection. Note difference in bill proportion and details in feathering.

is within the published range for Gray Heron but outside the expected range for Great Blue Heron.

DISCUSSION

The heron was picked up near Cape St. Mary's, which is close to the major shipping lane from Europe to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Thus, partial ship assistance cannot be ruled out; however, there is no direct evidence to suggest the bird hitched a ride. Its emaciated condition is consistent with having flown at least a large proportion of the trip. The timing of this record matches the main migration season for the species in Europe (Sep–Oct) (Cramp and Snow 1998) as well as arrival of vagrants on Barbados (Oct–Nov) (Buckley et al. 2006). This bird was a 1st-year bird based on the blackish-gray crown, short nape-plume, and gray sides of the neck (Mullarney et al. 1999).

We know of no previous specimens from North America. Gray Herons wander widely, averaging about 50 sightings a year on Iceland in recent years (Shanahan 2001) and have been recorded at least 15 times in Greenland, mainly in fall (Boertmann 1994). In the Caribbean, Gray Herons have been found on Barbados (first recorded in 1963; year-round resident since 1997 with up to 5–6 birds simultaneously; Buckley et al. 2006), Montserrat, Martinique, Trinidad, and Tobago (Shanahan 2001). A bird banded as a nestling in France was shot the next year on Trinidad (Ffrench and Ffrench 1966). Banded birds have also been found on Montserrat (Baudouin-Bodin 1960) and Capitaó Poco Ourém Pará, Brazil (Sick 1993:134). A Gray Heron was found dead on Bermuda on 7 October 2005 (Dobson 2005). There is also a sight record from Saint Paul Island, Alaska, which has been recorded as unsubstantiated (Burton and Smith 2001). A Gray Heron survived a transatlantic voyage on board a cargo vessel in 2002. Three Gray Herons landed on the ship northwest of the Azores on 26 September. One of them died and was discarded, another one died and the specimen was saved. The third bird was still alive when the vessel docked in

Conception Bay on 3 October but died soon afterward in Salmonier Nature Park. One of the specimens is now in the Newfoundland and Labrador Museum, St. John's.

During most of October 1996, a broad high-pressure ridge prevailed over the North Atlantic between Newfoundland and Britain, resulting in westerly winds to the east of Newfoundland. However, on 10 and 11 October, two low-pressure systems, remnants of hurricane Josephine, created an easterly flow of winds from Iceland via Greenland to Newfoundland. If this heron did not ride on a ship, it could have ridden these winds from Iceland to Newfoundland.

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